

Faith
Galatians 2:15-21

Today is Reformation Sunday, when we remember the birth of the Protestant Church over 500 years ago. We mark this day today by looking at one of the key theological issues of the Reformation: Faith vs. Works. How are people reconciled to God? Is it by following God's laws – that is, by doing good works – or by having faith in God's mercy? But the controversy is older than the Reformation. Indeed, it was an issue even during New Testament times. We read from Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 2, verses 15-21.

¹⁵We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. ¹⁷But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. ¹⁹For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; ²⁰and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

To help us understand this passage, we welcome to our pulpit the author himself. Please put your hands together and give a warm Lake Street welcome to our guest speaker: author, apostle, and one of the top Christians in the business, Paul of Tarsus!

Paul: Thank you very much. I am always glad to explain why salvation is by faith and not by works, though to be honest I cannot understand why it is still an issue. I've already explained it in Galatians! And Romans! Why isn't that enough? After all, I'm Paul.

But, to begin: to understand my position on the question of faith and works, you must remember my background. For those of you who don't know, I was raised in the strictest of all religious backgrounds. I studied under the best rabbis, and I joined the most rigorous and demanding of all Jewish sects – S-E-C-T-S: the Pharisees. In other words, I know about works. I lived my entire life before I encountered the risen Jesus Christ devoted to doing good works. My salvation, which started when Christ appeared to me in a vision, only came when I realized that all those works that I did were useless. I had been the most pristine pure Jew you could possibly imagine, and even all the good works I did were not enough for me to know God. In my letter to the Philippian church, I say that all those works I used to trust in are nothing but . . . ah . . . I'm afraid I don't know the English word. It means, oh, that stuff that you shovel out of the barn and spread on the fields. You know what I mean? Yah, that's what good works are. Smelly stuff.

So when I went around preaching, I showed people that you can't earn salvation by being good. You have salvation by accepting with faith the gift of God – grace. That was why I used to get so hot when people accepted God's gift with faith, then forgot about it and started trying to earn it by being good or being moral or being religious. That's what was happening in some of the churches in Galatia. That's why I had to write them that letter. I know that they had good theology from the start. After all, I started those churches. So I knew they had started off accepting God's grace, but then later under the influence of some super-Jews from Jerusalem, where James was the leader, they began teaching that now you had to keep the law, and even be circumcised, to be acceptable to God. I ask you! What sort of *meshuggina* God is that? "Oh, I love you, I forgive you, but you haven't done enough good works and you don't have the right elective surgeries. Too bad. Into Gehenna you go!" What nonsense! You want to be circumcised? Fine! Go circumcise yourselves! Use hedge clippers! Bah! Go read the rest of my letter to the Galatians, why don't you?

Look, think of it this way. Imagine that your father has just given you a beautiful house, the house of your dreams – better than your dreams – and it's entirely a gift. You haven't been a good child, but your father gives you the house anyway. Now, suppose after two months you start sending your father a check to pay him back: \$5 a month you send. That's what doing good works is like. Your father never asked you to pay him. And at the rate you're going – \$5 a month! – you'll never pay it back, anyway. But most of all, it's an insult, a rejection of your father's generosity. Live by faith, not by works. Thank you.

Works

James 2:14-26

Thank you, Paul, for that enlivening presentation. Now, in response to Paul's point of view, we have a second scripture reading, from the Book of James, chapter 2, verses 14-26.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

¹⁸But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. ²⁰Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? ²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ²³Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and

sent them out by another road? ²⁶For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

We are fortunate to have with us today James ben Joseph, senior pastor of the first mega-church in Christian history, Jerusalem Church. He's also the author of the bestselling book "The Book of James," read by millions and translated into thousands of languages. Please welcome . . . James.

James: Thank you very much. I want to begin by saying that I have nothing but respect for my brother Saul – I'm sorry, Paul, you changed your Jewish name, didn't you? I've often wondered how your parents felt about that. But you'll say it's none of my business, and you would be right. Anyway, I affirm and rejoice in his work with the Gentiles. All the churches acknowledge S-Paul's authority and his right to speak on this and on every other issue. And do you know why we honor him? Because we see Paul's life: a life of obedience and service and doing good works.

My dear Paul, no one is denying that salvation comes through God's grace, a gift of the Father, and certainly I would be the last to say that a person could *earn* salvation by doing good deeds. But I do have a question: in this life of faith, not of works, is there no need for obedience? Paul, speaks of "doing good works," but, you know, most of the things that he calls "good works" I would simply call "trying to live like Christ." This is not a bad thing, surely.

After all, Christ gave his life for us – and, by the way, what a good work that was! Surely we who receive such a gift, should show how that gift has changed our behavior. If your mother gives you a new sweater for your birthday, the best way to say thank you is by wearing it sometimes, don't you think? In the same way, if you say you have received forgiveness and eternal life all as a gift, perhaps it would be a good idea to try it on once in a while. Because if you go on living just as you always have – forgive me, I cannot help having some questions. Someone who claims to be redeemed by Christ's blood but who never does an act of mercy for others, never performs a religious duty – this is what you would call faith? As I say in my book: You show me your faith without good works, if you can; as for me, I'll show my faith by my good works.

My brother Paul left you with an illustration: a Father who gives a beautiful house to an unworthy child. And he is quite right: it would be an insult to try to pay for the house. It is a gift! On the other hand, what would you think about someone who received that lovely home as a gift and then never cleaned it, never repaired anything, never lifted a finger to take care of it? That's someone who doesn't understand the value of the gift, no? Would it not be better, having received the good gift from the Father, to take care of it and to invite the Father to live in it with you? Thank you.

A final word: I hope that you saw the debate between Paul and James as I did. Both are right. We come to God through faith, not by being good or being religious. Salvation is a gift of God. But doing good works is not irrelevant. In the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says we are

judged by our fruit, and fruit refers to behavior, not beliefs. For us, that would include changed attitudes, renewed relationships, and yes, good works. True faith will, inevitably, lead to doing good. It's just part of being thankful for God's gift.

Just remember: good deeds have to come from faith. Just doing good deeds or following religious habits by itself is worthless. James correctly says that faith without works is dead, but as Paul would point out, doing works apart from faith makes one a pious, self-righteous prig. And Paul would know. He'd been there.

So go from this place in faith, trusting in God's grace. And let it be the sort of faith that makes a difference to in your life – and the lives of others. Amen.